Chauville's Secret—

By one of those curious coincidences which not rarely occur in literature, "Hidden Treasure," the thrilling novel by David Whitelaw, now appearing here, was given the same title as the very interesting book by John Thomas Simpson, published by J. B. Lippincott & Company, of Philadelphia. Although the two stories have in their subject matter no points in common, the remainder of Mr. Whitelaw's story will be published under the title of "Chauville's Secret."

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Synopsis of Previous Chapters

VIVIAN RENTON and Eddie Haverton, modern soldiers of fortune, have been gambling with Hubert Baxenter, a prosperous attorney, in his London apartments. After their departure late at night Renton returns to the house, murders Baxenter and hides the body on the roof. While waiting for night to come again in order to make his escape, he finds in a desk a curious old yellowed document telling of a mysterious chest left in the care of one of Baxenter's ancestors by a French nobleman, the Marquis de Dartigny, of the Chateau Chauville. The chest has been handed down from one generation of Baxenters to another and carefully guarded in the hope that some day its rightful owner will be found. Renton decides to pose as the missing heir and claim the chest. He goes to France to make some needful inquiries about he Dartigny family.

The story of the mysterious chest goes back to the troubled days of the French Revolution, when the Marquis was staying in the fancied security of his chateau. His son Gaspard, who was active against the Paris Terrorists, learned his father's life was threatened, and sent a friend, Remy Perancourt, to convey him and Gaspard's little daughter Sylvia to a place of safety in England. In their flight they were pursued by an evil-looking revolutionist. After vainly trying to dodge this pursuer Remy finally attacked him and trussed him up. Later Remy shot him. The next morning the Marquis and little Sylvia sailed for England, where the chest and the document concerning it were turned over to the Baxenters for safe keeping. Now, more than one hundred years later, Hubert Baxenter's murdered body is found, but the police have no clue to the man who killed him. In order to learn what he needs to know about the Dartigny family history Vivian Renton changes his name to Baptiste Dartin, grows a beard and passes himself off as a Frenchman. He visits Canada, where he learns that one member of the Dartigny family has gone.

Dartin presents his fictitious claims to Robert Baxenter, the new head of the firm of Baxenter & Co. They are accepted as satisfactory and he is given the treasure chest. Robert Baxenter is in love with Stella Benham, a charming girl whose heart is set on making a great success on the stage. She has just secured what she thinks her big chance and tells Robert he must wait a year for her answer to his proposal. Taking her at her word, he goes on a long yachting trip, much to Stella's dismay.

CHAPTER X.

The Secret of the Dartignys.

THE same motives which had been responsible for Vivian Renton's residence in the cafe in the Latin Quartier now seemed to cause Baptiste Dartin to fix upon a secluded boarding house in Camden Town as his London abode. The accommodation was not at all to his extravagant tastes, but it was only temporary—and in Mornington street he felt at least safe from any unwelcome recognition from his late friends.

It was to a room on the first floor that he carried the ancestral chest of the Dartignys. It looked curiously out of place there upon the faded flowered cloth of the crazy table. The boldly branded escutcheon, the time-blackened wood, with its heavy, rusted hinges and clampings, suggested with a silent eloquence a dignity strangely out of place among the tawdry furnishings of the room.

Dynasties had risen and fallen, wars and famines had ravaged France, and through it all the chest of the Dartignys had lain, hidden from the very light of day, in the musty cellars beneath the Strand. Above its head the life of a century had played its part, the tramp of crowds claiming Waterloo had shaken its very dust. Monarchs had been crowned, had reigned and been gathered to their rest. And through it all the secret of the Chateau Chauville had slept.

Vivian was not dead to the sense of romance, and these thoughts passed through his mind as, after trying in vain to fit any of the keys on his ring to the lock, he stood hesitatingly, a heavy poker he had picked up from the fireplace in his hand. The pause was but momentary, and the man laughed at himself for his fancies.

With his penknife he whittled away at the wood beside one of the hinges, and inserting the point of the poker he used it as a lever. The oak was stout and the workmanship good, but perseverance won the battle, and with a creak of protest the wood splintered and yielded up its secret.

A little cloud of dust rose as Vivian wrenched off the lid, and when this had settled a curious sight met his eyes. A few pieces of gold and silver plate, richly chased and of exquisite workmanship, gleamed through wrappings of decayed and threadbare cloth. There were cases of worm-eaten leather, too, containing quaint old brooches and necklaces, rings and bracelets—valuable enough, but dulled with age, as though the stones had despaired of ever seeing daylight again. The man who now regarded them felt a distinct disappointment creeping over him, as one by one he lifted out the treasures.

After all, a certain gentleman whom he knew in Aldgate would give him, perhaps, a thousand pounds for the collection as it stood—"fences" are not generous where ancient jewel settings are concerned, and the melting-pot is no respecter of escutcheons and monograms and curious workmanship. Why, it had cost him the five hundred he had taken from Mortimer Terrace to prepare for this coup, apart from the—yes, it was distinctly disappointing!

He sat down in an old horsehair armchair and lit a pipe. It was a peculiar sight—the dull gleam of the vessels on the old tablecloth with the background of tawdry wallpaper and cheap oleographs. One of these, a portrait of the late Queen Victoria, seemed to be regarding the scene with marked disapproval. Dartin wondered what Mrs. Bates, his landlady, would think if she were to come up.

He broke off in his thoughts as his eye fell upon a small square of parchment partly hidden beneath one of the leather cases. He had not noticed it before and he took it up with interest. It was tied by a faded thin red ribbon to a large, heavy key of intricate workmanship. Vivian translated the words on it in wonderment:

"Key to the hidden closet in Chateau Chauville, fitting the keyhole behind the apple in the right-hand panel on the south side wall of the dining-hall."

Vivian sat for some minutes deep in thought. The words on the scrap of parchment were amazingly vague, and he asked himself whether he had not already spent too much time and money on the affairs of the de Dartignys. Better to see old Moseburg at once, clear the matter up and turn to other and more profitable game.

But there was Eddie—the one man who knew. Vivian's past associates were barred to him by the happenings at No. 9 Mortimer Terrace. It would never do to tread upon the trail of that sleeping crime. By taking on this affair he had burnt his boats and—— He jumped up with and oath and brought his fist down on the table, jingling the costly litter spread upon it.

"No; I'll see it through—to the very end. I'll realize on some of these jewels and put the others in a safe deposit. Luckily, I know the old chateau; I can at least test the truth of this matter of the keyhole."

He had been shown over the place once, and no doubt the old caretaker would be willing to show him over again.

He packed the valuable objects away in one of his portmanteaus, keeping back only a chain and locket and a small string of pearls. This latter he pledged with Attenborough the same afternoon, the price lent upon it being such as to cause the spirit of Vivian Renton to rise considerably.

That evening as Monsieur Baptiste Dartin, in company with Robert Baxenter, sauntered among the promenaders in the "Empire," he laughingly told the story of his fortunes. He made very light of the whole affair.

"About a thousand pounds' worth, I should say, Mr. Baxenter; nice old monogram stuff—rather too swanky for us Colonials, I'm afraid. By-the-by, I brought this for you—a sort of memento," and Vivian took from his pocket the locket and chain. "Rather quaint, eh? I expect there is some lady somewhere who"——

He had spoken facetiously, but there was a look in the young solicitor's eyes which caused the speaker to break off rather abruptly.

"Well, it'll be a memento of a romantic occasion, anyway. Come, the ballet's beginning. I don't want to miss any of it. It's all new to me, you know."

Robert Baxenter, murmuring his thanks, dropped the locket into his vest pocket and followed M. Dartin back to the stalls. Neither seemed anxious to return to the subject of the treasure of the Dartignys.

CHAPTER XI.

The Carved Apple.

THERE is a little arbor adjoining the inn of the "Three Lilies," a sheltered, vine-clad retreat from which the fair land of France spreads itself out, a radiant picture in the Summer sunshine—and fully appreciative of all this beauty was the man who sat before an easel within its pleasant shade one August afternoon.

Baptiste Dartin had no great knowledge of the art of painting, but he was gifted with a superficial skill in color which a student of less virile brain might have studied years to acquire and never succeeded. He had been in Massey three weeks and the small population were beginning to like this stranger from Paris who depicted—and made them presents of—such delightful little paintings of their countryside.

Monsieur Paul de Barron, the present owner of the property of Chauville, was in residence at the chateau, and Henri, the caretaker, who well remembered Vivian's last visit, had less time on his hands than formerly. He was able, however, to slip up to the "Lilies" of an afternoon, where, cigarette in mouth, he would watch the deft brushwork of his agreeable acquaintance. Vivian had given him a slight sketch of the chateau towers showing above the trees, and the old fellow, to whom Chauville and all pertaining to it were as sacred things, had become the painter's very slave for it.

Henri, seated beside him this Summer afternoon, watched the artist in a lazy content. Beside him were a box of cigarettes and a bottle of claret. The sun beat down through the vines clustering overhead and scattered little golden discs of radiance upon the boarded floor. A bee droned musically over the flowers in the garden. Framed between the supports of the trellis-work, cornfields and vineyards shimmered in the heat; afar off the hills, patched with forest lands, spoke of breeze and shadow.

Vivian, skilfully touching in the purple shade beneath a clump of poplars, was speaking carelessly. He did not take his eyes from his sketching-block.

"I'm glad you like the little drawing, Henri. I'm no artist, but——"

"Ah! monsieur—it is the chateau I love, not the art—that is—I mean," Henri stammered over his faux pas, "it is very beautifully done, Monsieur Dartin."

For a moment Vivian painted on without speaking, then:

"I'm better at interiors, Henri—dim old rooms, and all that. Look at that old panelling in the chateau, for instance—what a charming picture, Henri; I'll do it for you, if you like, when Monsieur de Barron goes away—next month, didn't you say?"

And Henri, who had no wish that the treasures under his care should blush unseen, rose to the bait with avidity—monsieur was too kind—he would have it framed like the other and they would go one on either side of his bed.

And so it was that on an afternoon when the September sun made glorious the old carvings of the Chauville dining-room, Monsieur Baptiste Dartin stood for the second time in the ancestral home of the Dartignys. He had entered warily, even to the extent of looking anywhere save at the panelling by the fireplace. He remarked, instead, to old Henri, on the carved ceiling, the windows in which the de Barron escutcheon had replaced that of the Dartignys. It was the caretaker himself who drew attention to the fireplace and to the defaced coat of arms in the stonework. Here the new resident, who was no Philistine, had respected history, and this broken and defaced shield of the Dartignys now remained to remind one of the days of the Revolution.

It was old Henri, too, who suggested the subject of the sketch, the angle to the right of the great stone hearth, with its rich coloring of oak and the little grouping of dim family portraits. There was a beam of sunlight that came athwart the room, and Vivian could hardly repress a start as he saw that this rested upon an exquisite carving of a cornucopia, and in the fruit that was tumbling from it an apple showed prominently.

He chose a position by the table, facing the fruit he was so eager to examine. Surely never, since the historic apple of Eden, had fruit such a fascination for a man. The painter could hardly hide his irritation when he saw that old Henri, taking a seat near him, produced his cigarettes and settled down to enjoy the painting.

For an hour or two work went on steadily and silently, then the caretaker rose and stretched his limbs. He had work that he must attend to—perhaps monsieur would come back and finish the sketch. In the mind of the old servant no shadow of suspicion had place, but there was an unformed idea at the back of his head that it was hardly right to leave him there alone, but—he was such a gentleman, and if he offended him he would stand little chance of possessing the picture that was progressing so well in the artist's sketch-book.

"Only another half-hour, Henri; the light of this setting sun is splendid—look at that golden ray on that old soldier's coat in the portrait—I can let myself out if I don't see you."

And it was said in such simplicity that the caretaker, entirely disarmed, hesitated no longer.

The door of the dining-room closed behind him, and the artist, waiting a moment, rose warily and tip-toed to the windows. He could make out the bent figure of the old man crossing the gardens and watched him until he disappeared into one of the farm buildings which showed across a meadow of parched grass that was separated from the gardens by a graceful line of poplars.

It was some moments before Vivian's strong fingers could make any impression on the carved apple—moments when he told himself that, after all, he had been chasing a shadow. Then, suddenly, a little creak, and he imagined that the wood beneath his hand moved; beads of moisture pricked out on his forehead as he verified this, then the top of the apple unscrewed gratingly and came away in his hand. He gave a little cry of relief.

Hastily whipping open his shirt he drew out the key which he had found in the chest and which he had suspended round his neck by a ribbon. He was not surprised that it fitted the keyhole that came to light behind the carving—nothing would surprise him now—and he told himself that he had succeeded and that he was on the threshold of wondrous things. A hasty glance at the window showed him the old man still at work in and out of the barns across the meadow.

Vivian carefully oiled the wards of the key from a tiny oil can he took from his paint-box, and, after a few attempts, the heavy key turned—grated—there was a rumble of locks. The man stared in wonderment—nothing had happened.

Then his eyes travelled to the fireplace. The large slab that comprised the back of the deep grate had rolled aside, displaying a cavity through which he could, with stooping, crawl. It seemed to yawn invitingly.

He thought rapidly and decided that what was to be done had better be done at once. It would take

(Continued on Next Page)